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A U.S. Strategy for Africa Through 2010

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Issue Definition

Turmoil in the Soviet Union, continuing decline in black Africa and the persistent United States Government budget deficit have underlined the need for a re-examination of U.S. national interests in sub-Saharan Africa and threats to those interests. If this re-evaluation confirms that both our interests and threats have diminished, we can probably reduce our embassy staffing and aid levels over the next few decades.

Proponents of a more activist U.S. Government stance toward sub-Saharan Africa often justify their position by pointing to enduring U.S. strategic interests in Africa, Soviet meddling on the continent, and the burgeoning needs of Africa's sick and hungry poor. Those who counsel less U.S. Government involvement in black Africa acknowledge the need for a generous response to humanitarian concerns, do not concede that Soviet perniciousness poses a threat to us, and see the continent as marginally significant to U.S. peacetime strategy. At stake in the dispute between these two opposing viewpoints are U.S. aid levels, staffing levels for diplomatic, information and intelligence collection elements in U.S. embassies in Africa, and a range of policy decisions on the extent to which we should try to influence Africa's course between now and 2010.

Background and Analysis

Identification of U.S. Interests Below the Sahara

In the period 1960-1990 the United States Government pursued a three-pronged strategy in black Africa: 1) Limit the involvement of the Soviet Union and its allies south of the Sahara; 2) Avoid excessive political, financial and military commitments on the continent; 3) Let Western European countries

that the U.S. has few enduring interests in Africa apart from thwarting Soviet aims--a limited national security interest--and peripheral interests in promoting representative government, building stronger economies and meeting humanitarian needs, all of which reflect our long standing interest in preserving and projecting American values.

These peripheral interests persist, but does the United States still need to be concerned about its national security interests in Africa? Does the continent still have strategic value to the U.S., either because of Africa's location or its mineral resources? Does black Africa have other economic or political strengths which merit our strategic attention in coming decades? Finally, what is the Soviet threat to U.S. interests on the continent?

Africa's Strategic Value to the U.S.

For over 25 years, most civilian policymakers, journalists and academics insisted that Africa is strategically important, a view not entirely shared by our military planners. By the late 1980's, most senior African specialists in Washington, civilian and military, acknowledged that the continent's strategic importance had been much overblown. The so-called "secure sea lanes" around the Cape of Good Hope exist only in the minds of Washington policymakers and South African officials anxious to ingratiate themselves with Washington; modern land-to-surface and surface-to-surface missiles pose credible threats to shipping hundreds of miles from shore. The Cape of Good Hope no longer represents a unique choke point to intercept oil tankers and military vessels plying the Indian and Atlantic oceans;

these ships are now at risk virtually wherever an enemy decides to track and intercept them.

Another element of the strategic argument for Africa is the presence of rare minerals in central and southern Africa which we need to manufacture lightweight, high-strength metal alloys. This argument falls apart on close examination: substitutes and alternative supply sources exist for each mineral--chromium, germanium, manganese, platinum, antimony, amosite and vanadium. The U.S. has adequate stockpiles of each mineral in the unlikely event supplies were interrupted. Economic necessity would likely lead governments of whatever hostile complexion in central and southern Africa to continue selling strategic minerals to the United States and its allies.

The third element buttressing the strategic argument for Africa is the presence of U.S. communications and tracking facilities in the region. These facilities include radio propaganda transmitters and relay facilities in Liberia, space tracking facilities in Madagascar, and a high-frequency radio communications base in Liberia used to supplement primary satellite links between Washington and U.S. embassies in Africa. But those who cite the presence of these facilities to justify a high-profile U.S. policy in Africa are wrong. The Voice of America facilities are useful but hardly vital; the remaining bases are obsolescent both because of technical advances in the past decade and the ready availability of alternate facilities in space or outside Africa.

Africa's Political and Economic Future

Few Western experts are optimistic about the future of most

voiced despair that the continent will ever win its struggle against poverty, disease and political turmoil. If Africa will remain weak and fragmented, its role in tomorrow's international system will be insignificant; indeed, if the cold war is dead on the continent and the U.S. can do without African raw materials, little justification exists to maintain the current level of U.S. Government aid and diplomatic involvement on the continent. Africa's present is the best predictor of its future, and the present picture is bleak:

Agriculture. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, one-third of black African countries cannot feed their populations at minimum levels; by 2000, the FAO expects that 21 countries, hampered by poor soils, erosion, deteriorating transportation systems and outdated farming practices, will need regular outside help to feed themselves.

Stability. All but a handful of black African countries have had violent changes of government since their independence in 1960, and many have had multiple coups d'etat--a total of 75 successful coups since 1957, not to mention many hundreds of unsuccessful coup attempts. Two-thirds of Africa is under military rule in one form or another, and on most of the remainder of the continent, African civilians govern in fear of military takeovers.

Quality of Government. African governments are run as tribal fiefdoms, often with a veneer of democracy. Key appointments, official contracts and government services are dispensed by members of the ruling tribe to increase the tribe's power and wealth. When government decisions are made to benefit the ruling tribe, government waste, corruption and mismanagement

are rewarded more often than punished. Because running the government is so profitable, African rulers tend to centralize political power, use force to crush dissent, and take extraordinary measures to perpetuate their rule.

Economy. Africa's 450 million population doubles every 20 years. Per capita income has now dropped below pre-independence levels. Private investment is declining in the face of excessive government regulation, corruption and mismanagement of African economies. Most African countries now face debt overhang far in excess of what they can service, given the depressed prices they receive for their primary product exports, although aggregate debt is not so high as to threaten the international banking system. The prospects are not bright for financial and monetary reforms in most black African countries; reforms tend to be superficial and few countries have the discipline to stick with them.

The Reduced Soviet Threat

In the 1970's and early 1980's, the Soviet Union repeatedly demonstrated its ability to influence events in most corners of black Africa. Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique and the Congo signed friendship treaties with Moscow. In these four countries and in at least thirty others on the continent, the Soviets maintained close and fruitful relationships with key leaders. Soviet advisors and arms fueled central government opposition to rebel groups in Ethiopia and Angola, dwarfing Western military commitments in Chad, Senegal and elsewhere on the continent. Not only did the Soviets show themselves more willing than the West to commit military resources in Africa, but their

generally effective in generating African support for issues of importance to Moscow.

Moscow's influence had peaked by the mid-80's and began to decline sharply in many African countries. The Soviets found themselves unable to compete with Western countries in providing development assistance and economic support funds in a period of declining prices for African primary products. In Benin, Mozambique, Guinea and a number of other countries, governments turned away from Soviet-style socialism and sought free and mixed market solutions to their economic problems. Soviet and Cuban military assistance proved unequal to the task of snuffing out rebellion in Angola and Ethiopia; Moscow came to view both wars as unwinnable, and at the end of the decade scrambled to dissociate itself from both beleaguered regimes. Forced to choose between reforms at home and its internationalist duties abroad, Gorbachev chose to leave many of Moscow's erstwhile African brides waiting at the altar. None wore white, and most regretted flirting with Soviet power.

But what are the odds for a Soviet comeback on the continent? Moscow's future there is dim, at least in the next 15-20 years. A Soviet resurgence would require Moscow's commitment to economic and developmental assistance it cannot and will not be able to afford. Moreover, the Soviets have soiled their nest in Africa: most African governments are disillusioned with Soviet ideology and parsimony, shoddy and outmoded military equipment, and Moscow's unrelenting pursuit of its own superpower interests on the continent. Nor is Gorbachev ready to renew the cold war in Africa, if an early 1990

"We were wrong in assessing the global situation. Though we were actively involved in (third world) conflicts, we disregarded their negative value in relaxing tensions with the West."

In sum, the Soviets have taken themselves out of the game in Africa, and are unlikely to return to the field in strength for many years. Soviet involvement below the Sahara is much diminished, and Moscow now represents little threat to our few interests there.

U.S. Interests and Strategy Through 2010

Soviet weakness and retrenchment--and our more hardheaded assessment of Africa's real strategic value to the U.S.--argue for dropping the anti-Soviet component from our calculus of national interests in the area. Our economic and trade interests are slight--Africa consumes only 7.6 percent of our exports, supplies 12 percent of our imports, and absorbs four percent of our foreign investment. As we look forward to the next 20 years, the basket of U.S. interests is thus considerably smaller than the basket we held since 1960.

The proposed strategy flowing from this analysis is straightforward: 1) Avoid excessive political, financial and military commitments on the continent; 2) Provide limited foodstuffs, medicine and technical advice to black African countries for humanitarian reasons; 3) Let Western European countries continue to take the policy lead.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Proposed Policy Changes

The proposed strategy implies lower diplomatic and intelligence staffing in U.S. embassies, the closing of a number

aid, and a much lower-key military sales effort on the continent. Losses from military hardware sales will probably offset some savings from embassy reductions, but nonetheless the U.S. Government should realize \$200-300 million in annual net savings. Another \$100 million in savings might be realized by closing or selling marginal U.S. installations. These funds might profitably be spent on humanitarian needs in black Africa, which will be much more pressing in coming years. Such expenditures would be consistent with one of our remaining interests in sub-Saharan Africa--to help preserve and project our values and self image as a generous and compassionate people.

A lower U.S. profile on the continent will keep us out of disputes peripheral to our interests and decrease the threat young African countries sometimes believe we pose to their independence. Less superpower involvement in Africa may well reduce tensions among certain countries, particularly those weaker countries who habitually seek powerful allies to buttress their causes. Moreover, some African countries may find U.S. values more attractive if we are seen to be less engaged on the continent.

On the other hand, reduced embassy staffing and military sales will leave us less equipped to influence the course of events in African countries. While our interests there will be marginal over the next few decades, reducing our ability to influence the pace and direction of change may not be prudent; certainly the continent will be much more chaotic as economies wither, discontent rises and governments collapse. Disengaging

courage and steadfastness, particularly from those West European countries left holding the bag.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The United States no longer has national security interests in sub-Saharan Africa, nor does the Soviet Union still threaten what peripheral interests we have on the continent. We should continue to undertake low-key humanitarian projects and to promote political and economic stability by nudging African countries toward democratic and free-market systems. These efforts should be small scale and low cost; we should expect no spectacular successes on the continent, as Africa's problems are endemic and may in fact be insoluble. Accordingly, we should reduce our embassy staffing, scale back large aid projects, and reduce military sales on the continent.

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